

Divorce and Remarriage: A Harmful Reality of Living in a Fallen World

Surveying the Divorce Proliferation

Our culture has witnessed a steady dissolution of the biblical view of marriage, as God established it. There is a growing lack of biblical understanding of the theological underpinnings and purpose of marriage. Therefore, it is of utmost importance for the Church of Jesus Christ to fully understand God's design for marriage. His original plan, to still be upheld in our day, is that marriage is an exclusive, life-long covenant of committed love between a man and a woman. This God-ordained institution is entered into at a public ceremony of worship and provides the indissoluble framework for relational intimacy, sexual fulfillment, and raising children to the glory of God. The spouses are to pursue a lifetime of companionship, becoming one flesh, physically, spiritually, and emotionally (Gen 2:18-24). Furthermore, marriage is to reflect God's love for and His relationship with His Church, as taught in Ephesians 5.

However, a biblical theology of matrimony is not the intent here. This paper will address what the Bible teaches about divorce and remarriage in an attempt to "sway the tide" so to speak, in regards to the all-too-frequent divorces, especially among God's people. I pray these words will encourage you to work through the sticky and difficult issues with the spouse God has blessed you with.

In spite of convoluted thinking and the emotionally charged discussions, we must be tethered to Scripture. We must keep striving for God's Word to be the standard for our understanding of marriage, divorce, and remarriage. We must seek to pursue biblical reconciliation with a fellow sinner and manifest the grace of God in the covenant vows of marriage. We must exhaust every means of grace to pursue the one-flesh partnership intellectually, emotionally, spiritually, and physically in order to be obedient and ascribe the maximum amount of glory to God, as we live in a way that pleases Him (2 Cor 5:9). Then, only after trying every means of grace available, should one consider divorce, and only if clearly substantiated by Scripture. In other words, marriage is like the rules on a bus; sit and stay put!

The issues of divorce and remarriage can be fuzzy and convoluted. Thus, we will introduce the main positions taught and held by biblical scholars on the topic, proceed with several introductory warnings to consider, continue with the main texts of Scripture to consider on the subject, and finally draw some ramifications and applications of Scriptural truth to these issues of divorce and remarriage in order to clear up convolution and re-focus any fuzziness.

Surveying of Divorce Positions

First, notice the varying positions on divorce. There is the extreme position of no divorce and no remarriage.¹ This view, propounded by Charles Ryrie, Bill Gothard, Robert Thomas, and J. Carl Laney teaches that there are never grounds for either divorce or remarriage; that marriage is indissoluble, and that the covenant relationship is unbreakable until one spouse dies.

¹ J. Carl Laney, "No Divorce, No Remarriage" *Divorce and Remarriage: Four Christian Views*, ed. H. Wayne House, (Downer's Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 15-54. See

There is the opposite extreme; that of divorce/remarriage in a wide variety of circumstances.² This view, espoused by such public Evangelical figures as James Dobson, suggests that abuse is one of the many reasons, including emotional, physical, and verbal abuse. A narrower view, held by John Stott, John Piper, and William Heth, holds a provision for divorce in some cases, but no remarriage.³

Finally, there's the view represented by the Westminster Confession and reformed Bible teachers such as John MacArthur, Jay Adams, John Murray, Lorraine Boettner, and Thomas Edgar.⁴ This view sees the very limited grounds for divorce, and thus remarriage, as unrepentant sexual sins (Matt 19:9) or desertion by an unbeliever (1 Cor 7:15). This view is a response to when one spouse has forsaken his/her covenant obligations. It is simply an accommodation to man's sin for the protection of the other party. It is not, however, a commanded response nor is it part of God's original plan for marriage.

Warnings to Consider

Next, let's consider some warnings before we dig into the texts. Our interpretive goal is to be zealous to rightly divide the Word of God. That means several things, not the least of which is that we will not settle for a surface reading of the text but will pay close attention to context and authorial intent and not import other biblical writers' arguments into the text at hand. Thus, there is a need to survey and understand each passage individually, as Jay Adams so insightfully adds: "We must keep in mind, though, that the context of a passage is always the key to the meaning of a word."⁵ We seek to let each text present its own teaching in light of its grammatical-historical context. In other words, we do not want to proof-text, twisting Scripture to prove our point or posit one passage against another.

Sitting under the authority of Scripture also means that we will guard against being swayed by sympathy for hurting people at the expense of rejecting or ignoring Scripture. We must plumb the depths to assure we understand what God means by what He has said. We must recognize that God often turns our logic into foolishness. We must not abuse the analogy of the faith principle. Thus, we must recognize the importance of a systematic approach in order to put our minds around each of the pertinent texts, noticing both what they say and don't say.

² Larry Richard, "Divorce & Remarriage under a Variety of Circumstances" *Divorce and Remarriage: Four Christian Views*, ed. H. Wayne House, (Downer's Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 215-48.

³ William A. Heth, "Divorce, but No Remarriage" *Divorce and Remarriage: Four Christian Views*, ed. H. Wayne House, (Downer's Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 73-129. See also John Piper's "Divorce and Remarriage: A Position Paper" posted at www.desiringgod.org, July 21, 1986.

⁴ Thomas R. Edgar, "Divorce & Remarriage for Adultery or Desertion" *Divorce and Remarriage: Four Christian Views*, ed. H. Wayne House, (Downer's Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 151-96. See also Jay E. Adams' *Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage in the Bible* (Zondervan, 1980) and John MacArthur's *The Divorce Dilemma* (Day One Publications, 2009).

⁵ Jay Adams, *Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage in the Bible* (Zondervan, 1980), 32.

Surveying “Divorce” Passages

Now, let’s look at the pertinent texts. Let us begin by gaining some insight from the rich OT foundation, starting in Malachi. Be reminded that both the New and Old Testaments speak cohesively and unanimously with one voice. Though in the progress of revelation the NT expands upon the OT’s teaching and gives greater specificity to it. This expansion and specificity are achieved while both Testaments remain consistent with each other.

It often seems that proponents of the “no divorce ever” position like to quickly cover the discussion with the blanket of “God hates divorce” per Malachi 2:16. Yes, it is true that God hates divorce. It always leaves carnage in its wake, and brings a breach into the marriage covenant, which God, the architect, never intended. Additionally, it leaves its dreadful effect upon the spouse and any children involved. However, it is a particular kind of divorce that the prophet had in mind that was especially grievous to the Lord, as the context bears out. There is no verse in Scripture that explicitly teaches that marriage is indissoluble-not even the “one flesh” passage that is so often used in the debate (Gen 2).

In reference to God’s hatred of divorce, please notice that in **Malachi 2:13-16** Malachi was focusing on the divorcing of older, faithful wives in order to marry younger women. Note that “wives of their youth” is repeated twice, making clear that these were older couples. In that day, as in ours, there is a host of older men deserting their first wives in order to marry more sexually attractive, younger women. Also repeated twice is that they “failed to guard themselves in their spirits” as they went through the normal troubles and triumphs of life in a fallen world, post Genesis 3.

Thus, what elicited the bitter rebuke by the prophet of God was man’s selfishness and sin. It was their divorces motivated by lust; their abandonment of faithful, loving wives. We cannot conclude from Malachi that God hates every divorce indiscriminately. After all, God is the one who commanded divorce by separating Jews from idolatrous wives (Ezra 10:10-19). Though God hates the breaking of the one-flesh relationship in a covenant of committed love, which was His intention from the beginning, it is sometimes the lesser of two evils and would also prevent future and greater spiritual catastrophe. Therefore, this passage cannot overrule a God-granted exception that we will see shortly. All arguments of this sort, especially the one-flesh of Genesis 2:24, are built on indirect references.

Again, it was the covenant-breaking of marriage that was condemned. The multiplied divorces were a fruit and manifestation of covenant infidelity. Marriage is so much more than the world’s view of being merely a legalized contract; it is a holy promise entered into before God. It was the minimizing of the covenant that divorce causes that God indeed hates.

What about **Ezra 9-10**? At this point in Israel’s history, God’s people had married wives from pagan nations around them in rebellion to God’s requirements. Ezra gives a command for national repentance, which would be manifested by divorcing their foreign wives. Though this was a unique situation at a particular time in history, the LORD, nonetheless, sanctioned and blessed this action (Ezra

10:2-3). These divinely sanctioned divorces were clearly a concession to the rebellion of God's people, who had already been commanded long before entrance into the Promised Land, not to have any connection, especially marriage, with the pagans (Deut 7:1-5). This legal divorcement dissolved the marriage bond and made allowance for remarriage where the Israelites could express a renewed heart to follow God's Law and enjoy His blessing and mercy.

What about Jeremiah's word on the subject? In **Jeremiah 3:6-10** we see a metaphor of what God does to "adulterous, faithless Israel" for her harlotry. It pictures how the innocent party (in this case, God) can be involved in divorce without sin and even initiate the divorce. It was Israel who forsook her side of the covenant so God divorced her.

Now we move to the NT. **Matthew 5:27-32** is a passage I came to with great trepidation when expositing the Gospel of Matthew. I readied to preach this passage in a church context that held to the "no divorce ever" position. Remember, the Pharisees were concerned only with the outward act. They taught that the only way one committed adultery was through sexual union. And it is their interpretation that Jesus takes on in the Sermon on the Mount, that of minimizing God's commands and annulling them. They quoted the Law but missed the whole point of obeying it from the heart. Adultery is not something that just "happens" but is part of a process of worshipping one's own desires, wants, and cravings that begins in the heart. A person's heart starts looking lustfully and then the act eventually follows. As wrong as the act is, it merely shows that the lustful heart is contrary to God and the person is not enjoying true fellowship with God.

Jesus goes on in verses 29-30 to continue teaching about lust-which is the point, not divorce. These verses have obviously been misinterpreted and misapplied over the years with senseless harm. We know that Jesus was being figurative on the plucking out of an eye or the severing of a limb. Lust is a problem of the sinful heart, that which compels behavior, not the body part that engages in sinful deeds. A blind person can have just as much trouble with lust as a sighted person. A one-handed person can sin just as much as a person with both hands. Jesus was not addressing the outward tool of sin but the inner cause of offense. Thus, since a lustful heart leads ultimately to adultery, it must be changed. Radical action, empowered by the Gospel, is needed to slay remaining sin in the heart. And only by such an inner compulsion by the Spirit to change, when in humility one recognizes their poverty of spirit, can one flee to Christ and escape hell.

Culminating His teaching on man's adulterous heart, Jesus introduces what has become known as the "exception clause" (Matt 5:31-32), which is later expounded in Matthew 19:3-9 (and also found in Mk 10:11-12; Lk 16:18). In His teaching here, Jesus calls Moses' teaching as a witness (Deut 24:1-4). Man's wicked and hard heart, which Jesus just spoke about, had caused the multiplication of divorces for virtually any reason at all. Due to the chaos surrounding divorces, Moses gave a concession to man's hard heart in order to protect the innocent party. It was a provision, a gift of grace. He did not condemn divorce, nor did he command it (contrary to what the Pharisees foolishly stated in Matt 19:7-8) but he permitted

divorce and sought to regulate it. Adultery was not part of the original grounds for divorce, as the punishment for adultery under the law was death by stoning.

Though Moses did not command divorce, the Mosaic principles that must be followed were:

1. Limiting divorce to certain causes. Indecency (literally “matter of nakedness”) must be proved in the presence of witnesses.
2. Giving a bill of divorce. This states that the wife is innocent of unfaithfulness.
3. Not allowing the husband to re-marry the wife he divorces. This gets to the seriousness of the marriage covenant.

Deuteronomy 24:1-4 clearly teaches that a divorced woman who marries is so completely and permanently severed from her initial husband that if innocently divorced from her second husband she can marry another believer but never her first husband.

The religious leaders of Jesus’s day used the supposed authority of whatever rabbi they chose to quote in support of their argument. There were those who by and large followed Hillel, who stated that a man could divorce his wife for any reason at all. On the opposite end of the spectrum were the Jewish leaders who followed Shammai’s rabbinic teaching that divorce was permissible only for a major offense.

In contrast to all the false ideologies about marriage and the permissibility of divorce, Jesus taught that marriage is viewed by God as a lifelong commitment, and should not be terminated by man in divorce. God, the master-architect of marriage, designed marriage to be permanent until the death of one of the spouses. Jesus abrogated the death penalty for adultery and made it an exception for divorce. He gives this teaching in abbreviated form here and develops it further in Matthew 19. He says that the only grounds for divorce (into which no one is to rush, since it is merely an option, not an obligation), is sexual sin (*porneia*). This is a general term that includes many types of sexual sin such as adultery, homosexuality, incest, etc. However, adultery seems to be the sexual sin that is emphasized, especially as confirmed in Matthew 19. Once the spouse has broken the intimate marriage covenant by sexual sin (translated “unchastity” here), the innocent party is released from his/her covenant obligation.

If either spouse pursues divorce in an unbiblical way, they have sinned against their spouse and God. Furthermore, if they pursue another marriage without the marriage bond being broken, they commit adultery because the covenant of marriage is breached in an unbiblical manner. However, if the guilty spouse repents of his or her sin and seeks reconciliation with the former spouse, they can find grace, mercy, and forgiveness (5:23-24).

Now we come to the preeminent and definitive passage on the issue of divorce-**Matthew 19:3-9**, which contains the answer of whether or not divorce is allowable. Here is where we find the exception clause, that of sexual immorality/marital unfaithfulness (*porneias*). Jesus is “allowing divorce for

fornication as a general term (*porneia*) which is technically adultery (*moicheia* from *moichao* or *moicheuo*).”⁶

There are three various views as to what Jesus is proposing here. This could refer to the single act of adultery, unfaithfulness during the betrothal period (cf. Matt 1:18-19), or continued promiscuity.

So:

1. Some think this is a synonym for adultery (*moicheia*). So the grounds for divorce are the unfaithfulness of either partner.
2. Others assert that it speaks of sexual offense during the betrothal period wherein the parties were bound together but had not consummated the marriage sexually. In Jewish eyes, they were considered married at this point, but the union could be ended by such an act of treachery.
3. Yet others view it as a relentless, persistent, unrepentant lifestyle. They use in their argument that in the NT *porneia* is a broader term than *moicheia*.

The Pharisees, knowing that Jesus taught the permanence of the marital relationship, questioned why Moses made a provision, expecting Jesus to settle the debate (of allowable grounds for divorce on the basis of the meaning of “something indecent about her,” Deut 24:1) that had raged on between the differing rabbis Shammai and Hillel. Jesus starts off by giving the general principle that the couple should not divorce, referring to Genesis 2:24, the institution of marriage in the beginning (Matt 19:4-6). The marriage relationship, the covenant of commitment that God had created, was not to be broken. For man to destroy a marriage would be to destroy a creation of God Himself. Marriage is God’s creation and divorce is man’s invention. Then in verse 7 Jesus mentions Moses’s concession, recorded in Deut 24:1-4, given due to the peoples’ hard hearts (Matt 19:8). The phrase is literally “toward your hardness of heart.” Though God had initiated a covenant relationship with Israel, their hearts were dried up (literally “tough”) towards the law and requirements of God. So when Moses introduced this divorce provision, restricting it to uncleanness, the original ordinance of marriage was not abrogated nor superseded, but it continued unaltered. This concession arose due to human frailty, but it was not so from the beginning, before the fall of man when sin entered the picture. Jesus then gave the definitive statement in verse 9. It is clear and relatively simple, regardless of your possible disagreement. The complexity arises only when there is an attempt to avoid the clear, straightforward understanding of the verse.

In spite of people who desire to give greater priority to **Mark 10:2-12**, Mark describes the same statement made by Jesus in Matthew 19:9. Nowhere in Mark’s text does he deny any exception stated in Matthew. Neither can you render the aorist tense as “once for all,” for it is not speaking of permanence. God does, however, ordain marriage so that it is not to be broken by man. Yet, if a believer seeks to have an unbiblical divorce and pursues another marriage, he/she is guilty of the sin of adultery. He still can receive forgiveness if he confesses his sin and repents of it. From that point of repentance forward, one is to continue in the marriage relationship he/she is in.

⁶ A.T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, 1:155.

Dr. Luke brings no additional information to the table of this discussion. **Luke 16:18** merely refers to divorce as an example of how the Mosaic Law could not fail. It was not being replaced by Jesus but fulfilled and brought to its ultimate culmination.

One final text often cited in this discussion, but not pertinent to it, is **Romans 7:1-6**. Here Paul uses marriage as an illustration of how Christ's death releases the believer from the demands of the Mosaic Law. The Law only has bearing on one's life while he is alive. There is no mention made of divorce, and it cannot be introduced in such an illustration.

We come now to our final NT text, which teaches contrary to the most common views of "no divorce/remarriage"-that of **1 Corinthians 7**. There are several things to mention from this passage before drawing conclusions. A more naturally derived understanding of the text does not presuppose a sacramental view of marriage (as in Roman Catholicism) or its equivalent of marriage being indissoluble, especially as we limit divorce/remarriage only to those instances specifically discussed in Scripture.

The apostle says it is good for the unmarried (in this context, divorced) and widows to remarry only "in the Lord" for they are not under bondage (7:39). Some have sought to discount Paul's words in verse ten, "not I but the Lord," saying the Lord forbids departure from the marriage relationship even if one is deserted by the unbelieving spouse. In essence, they posture Jesus against His apostle Paul, which is ludicrous.

So how do we make sense of it? Though Paul has apostolic authority (meaning that though he only has derived authority, it's as if God Himself were directly addressing His people), he appeals to the authority of Christ. In his command to married people it is as if Paul steps aside and permits Jesus to speak directly to the Corinthians. Per Fee, the original intent was not to establish canon law but to deal with the specific situation at Corinth (i.e., rejection of marriage based on ascetic grounds).⁷ Paul recounts how Jesus spoke on this question so he appeals to His authority, though this is a rare instance in which Paul appealed directly to the authority and teachings of Jesus (cf. 1 Cor 9:14; 11:23; 1 Tim 5:18).

So the issue is not that Paul lacked authority, since Christ was always Paul's ultimate authority for all that he wrote. Furthermore, when he says to "not separate," since Jesus interpreted the seventh commandment to mean no divorce, Paul picks up the same perspective. Even though Paul uses "separate" as an obviously different word than "divorce," the context dictates that he is using the two terms interchangeably and synonymously. We must deny any innate desire for greater precision. When we come to verse twelve where Paul refers to his inherent authority, it's as if he closes the quotation marks of Jesus's teaching on the subject, then picks back up on his apostolic authority, though still derived from the Lord.

⁷ Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1993), 291.

Finally, Paul makes the ruling to accept the departure of the unbelieving spouse as he, not the believing spouse, bears the responsibility. The advisability and need for obedient response is underscored in the original language. This Greek present, middle, imperative, translated “let him depart,” indicates permission. Thus the believer is to respond in faith and obedience to these circumstances, which are beyond their control. What a merciful provision by a gracious Lord!

Surveying Divorce Principles

Now that we have briefly surveyed each of the pertinent texts on the subject of divorce/remarriage, let’s draw some ramifications of these texts to specific situations.

- Just because Jesus and Paul made two allowances for a biblical divorce; that does not mean it is to be the first pursued line of offense. Every measure must be taken towards immediate reconciliation (cf. Matt 18:15-17) as we pursue peace (cf. Rom 14:19; 2 Tim 2:22; 1 Pet 3:11). Reconciliation should be the Christian’s highest concern, as he pursues the glory of Christ and the good of another (Phil 2:3-4).
- If the unbeliever leaves the relationship but is unwilling to file for divorce, that places the believing spouse in a precarious situation. Because he/she “is not under bondage in such cases” (cf. 1 Cor 7:15), this party is no longer obligated to the marriage covenant and may file for divorce without fear of God’s displeasure.
- Similar to the previous point, if one party resists all means of reconciliation, refusing the monogamous, cohabiting relationship, then the faithful spouse is released from the covenant vows (cf. Jer 3:6-10; Matt 5:32; 1 Cor 7:15).
- Remarriage remains an option for the faithful partner if the divorce was on biblical grounds and he/she marries in the Lord (cf. Rom 7:1-3; 1 Cor 7:3).
- Recognize that only after the marriage union are many false professions of faith manifest.⁸ There are no grounds for divorcing those who manifest that they are not in union with Christ, apart from the two exceptions given by Christ or Paul. Remain in the relationship, as Paul instructs (1 Cor 7) and pray for his/her salvation, that God would be kind enough to grant them a repentant faith (Rom 2:4).
- Neither is abuse a rationale for divorce. God has already made provisions in His Word for such instances, in the form of government (Rom 13) and church discipline (Matt 18).

When there is a repudiation and break of the covenant of marriage, either through marital infidelity or a departure from one’s companion, God is dishonored and hates that resultant breach. The Gospel, the good news of forgiveness of sin is the only source of hope and healing of such wounds that unchastity or divorce

⁸ For more on false professions, see: “I Have Decided to Follow Jesus” at http://biblicalexpositor.org/site/outlines.asp?sec_id=180007636&secure=&dlyear=0&dldcat=Gospel

inflicts. Husbands cannot love their wives as Christ loved the Church, nor can wives respond with loving submission, until they bow to the Lord Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. Furthermore, Christians in marriage must seek to be sanctified and pursue humility in their service to Christ since their aim is to please Him (2 Cor 5:9). Even still, they must seek to model Christian forgiveness, even if their partner has sinned against them grievously. The only proper and biblical response to a repentant spouse who had been unfaithful is that of forgiveness. So the issue is not simply the mercy of divorce, but the responsibility of forgiveness. It is a forgiveness which is immediate (Lk 17:3), repeated (Lk 17:4), and lavish (2 Cor 2:5-8). Such forgiveness is an enabling by the Spirit to those who have been forgiven by Christ and infinite debt of sin.

Yet, in the cases of marital infidelity and desertion by an unbeliever, God has provided the concession of divorce, though it is not a command. It is an option, after all attempts at reconciliation have failed, but it is not an obligation. Let's avoid the tendency of practicing hermeneutics as the Pharisees, as they tried to take advantage of a *permission* of the law by calling it a *command* (Matt 19:7-9).⁹

May God be glorified in the covenant of committed companionship which He designed for our good and His eternal praise and glory!

For further study:

Divorce, by John Murray. Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company.

Divorce and Remarriage: Four Christian Views, edited by H. Wayne House.

Intervarsity Press. See especially Thomas Edgars contribution.

Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage in the Bible, by Jay E. Adams. Zondervan Publishing House.

The Divorce Dilemma, by John MacArthur, Day One Publishers.

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⁹ Henry Alford, *Alford's Greek Testament: An Exegetical and Critical Commentary*, (Baker Book House, 1980), 1:193.